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THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH: HABAKKUK 2:4

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There is no single text in the Old Testament that plays a larger rôle in the doctrinal discussions of the New Testament than this little sentence from the prophecy of the prophet Habakkuk. It was also one of the foundation stones on which Martin Luther built his anti-papal doctrines of the Reformation, and changed the course of church history. Its modern interpretation reflects the utilitarian character of our day, and the method by which its teachings may be entirely fulfilled in everyday living.

In our study of this text we shall discover that the most influential of its interpreters were its first translators, and that the meaning of the verse in later times was largely colored by those early renderings, for a translation at best is an interpretation of the text under treatment.

In any use of such an early translation we have one element of uncertainty that must not be disregarded, viz., we are never sure that we have the original text from which such a translation was made. Since our purpose, however, is not to determine the original text, we shall concern ourselves mainly in ascertaining what the various translators made out of the text which each found at his hand.

Before we shall be able to put a correct estimate on anyone's translation or interpretation, we should discover the purpose of the author in using this text. In other words, what was the prophet's line of thought in which this sentence occurs? What meaning does the context put into this text?

The prophet Habakkuk is predicting the downfall of the Chaldean power, whose invading army shall soon shatter and scatter the remnant of the Kingdom of Judah. He has made a complaint to Jahweh that this wicked invader "swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he" (1:13); "shall he therefore empty his net, and spare not to slay the nations continually?" (1:17). Figuratively Habakkuk

takes his stand upon a watch-tower and looks to see what answer Jahweh will give to his complaint. The answer comes (2:2-4) and he is commanded to write it plainly so that he who reads it may run and escape from the threatening disaster. The vision will be fulfilled in its own time, and is even now panting in its haste toward fulfilment. It is no pretense nor feint but a real disaster that is certain to come and thus to fulfil the vision which he saw. If it does not come at once, wait for the fulfilment; it shall surely come, and it shall not long delay.

Now in vs. 4 the prophet characterizes the invader, the Chaldean, thus: "Behold, his soul is puffed up [is swollen], it is not upright [straight] in him; but [in contrast with him] the righteous shall live by his faith" (mg., in his faithfulness).

The earliest known interpretation of this passage is found in the Septuagint. The interpreter or translator presents us the third and fourth verses in the following language: "For the vision [is] for a set time, and will come forth at last and not in vain. If he tarry, wait for him, for he will surely come, and will not linger. If he shrink back, my soul has no pleasure in him; but the just shall live by my faith."

The Septuagint translator quite misconceived the true meaning of the passage and seems to have had for the basis of a part of it another Hebrew text. His idea evidently was that if the Chaldean should shrink back from carrying out God's will in invading the territory of the Jewish people, he would certainly forfeit the divine favor. In sharp contrast with him, a righteous person would save himself, would endure by being faithful to the requirements of his God. The "my faith" is probably an error for "his faith," for the real difference in the Hebrew is exceedingly small.

The next important use of this passage we find in three quotations made by the writers of the New Testament. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews enjoins his readers to recall their past history, to remember that their enlightenment by the gospel had been followed by "a great conflict of sufferings" (10:32), that they had been buffeted about by spoilers, and taunted by reproaches. In such sufferings he says (10:35, 36): "Cast not away, therefore, your boldness, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need

of patience, that, having done the will of God, ye may receive the promise." In vss. 37, 38, we find: "For yet a very little while, He that cometh shall come, and shall not tarry. But my righteous one shall live by faith: And if he shrink back, my soul hath no pleasure in him." The 39th verse is a further interpretation of the 38th, as follows: "But we are not of them that shrink back into perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul."

The author of this Epistle has taken the Septuagint translation and used it from one point of view to convey quite another idea. The translator of the Septuagint apparently describes the coming of God rather than the fulfilment of a vision. In his "he that cometh" (vs. 37) there is evidently a reference to the coming of the Messiah to the earth, often mentioned in the New Testament as the one who is coming to judge the world. Our author seems to see the appearance of the judge so vividly portrayed in Malachi, chap. 3. His coming is in the future and when he shall appear the righteous one (mg.) shall live, shall endure by his faith in God's promise, and in his power to fulfil his word of promise. The second half of vs. 38 is transposed from its order in the Septuagint and is employed here to emphasize the importance of patient endurance in the face of the severe sufferings through which they are now passing. If the Christian should not endure these testings of his faith but should yield to impatience, distrust, disbelief, and should shrink back from the test which should meet him, God will have no pleasure in him, will take no delight in him. In order to stiffen the backbones of his readers, and to give them sound, healthful encouragement, the author of the Epistle adds (vs. 39): "But we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul." In other words, the "faith" of the text under consideration is regarded by him as that which is effective toward the saving of the soul. The "live" of the text is synonymous with "salvation."

While the text in the Hebrew of Habakkuk discusses the Chaldean invasion, the certainty and speed of its approach, and the endurance of the just or righteous in the face of it, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews sketches Israel's immediate afflictions and persecutions, and adopts the Septuagint interpretations in a somewhat free manner, by referring "the coming" to the coming of God in judgment, and

to the necessity of remaining steadfast in faith as over against affliction and all that would cause one to shrink back and thus be lost. The real outcome of the two thoughts is practically one and the same, viz., that in the face of the coming disaster the righteous shall endure through his faith.

The next two uses of our text are found in the epistles of Paul, Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11. In the Romans passage including vs. 16, Paul describes the character and effectiveness of "the gospel" in these terms: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith." In this use of the Habakkuk text, Paul leaves out of account the original connection in which it is found. In these verses he is defining the power of the gospel, its origin, its scope, and its method in building up believers. The righteousness of God that is revealed in this context may include both of the somewhat divergent views, viz., that (1) this is a righteousness that inheres in God himself and also (2) a righteousness that proceeds from God for the gradual edification of the believer. With his familiar "as it is written," Paul then introduces the words, "The righteous shall live by faith." The whole context leads us to infer that those whom Paul has just described as believers in the gospel constitute the righteous and that these righteous, just ones shall live, that is, endure, by means of this faith. Their belief is unto salvation, to deliverance from the results of unbelief. Hence "to live by faith" is equivalent to endure through belief and trust in God, and thus to possess eternal life (cf. John 3:15, 16). There is not a word in this connection about the much-talked-of doctrine of faith as over against that of works. Paul is simply emphasizing the supreme importance of faith, of "constancy" (Toy), for the eternal endurance of the righteous man. The eighteenth verse helps us realize that the converse of the text is severely true, that the unrighteous man shall perish through his unfaithfulness.

In the third chapter of Galatians Paul is speaking of the efficiency of law and of faith in securing justification. In concluding one section of his argument he says (vss. 9-11): "So then they that are of faith are blessed with the faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the

works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, Cursed is everyone who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them. Now that no man is justified by the law before God is evident: for, The righteous shall live by faith." Paul's appeal to this passage in this connection follows a discussion in which he shows that even in Old Testament times and among the patriarchs, faith was a condition of justification, that works of the law could not justify, nor could they be wholly efficient in bringing about the endurance of the righteous man. If the law-keeper should be ever so faithful in observing the minutiae of the law, all would be in vain if he should not exercise faith in God—"steadfast adherence to God in true-hearted obedience" (Toy). While Paul is not comparing the effectiveness of faith and works he is showing that works of the law alone are neither efficient nor sufficient. Paul uses the words of Habakkuk in practically the same sense as the prophet had done, in specifying the characteristic of those who should live, endure perpetually.

The Jewish interpreters, who left for us the Targums of the prophets, have a paraphrase which reads the fourth verse as follows: "Behold the wicked are saying, All these things are not [to be]; but the just shall be established by their faithfulness," when the threatened disaster falls upon the land.

The Vulgate varies a little from the Hebrew. It reads: "Behold, he is unbelieving, his soul is not right within him; the just, however, lives in his faith." That is, this invader, this destroyer who will bring the disaster on the land, has within him a life of non-straightness, of crookedness; but in contrast with him, the righteous man shall through his faithfulness endure to the end. The Talmud says that the 613 precepts which God once delivered from Sinai were collected into this one sentence, "The just shall live by faith."

Luther's one corner-stone of the Reformation, in opposition to the decrees, decretals, and bulls of Rome, was this text. In his interpretation of it, he did not read it, "The just by faith shall live," the man who is made just by his faith, but the one who is just, having been so made by God himself, shall live, endure, through his belief and faith in God. "He who has the feeling in his heart which cleaves to another as faithful and true, and depends upon him, may call it truth

or what he will; but Paul and we do not know another name for such a disposition than faith" (Lange, *Habakkuk*, p. 29). Belief and faith in the church, in popes and decrees, is ineffectual, does not make for endurance, for salvation, for eternal life. Luther's tremendous emphasis upon the main teaching of this text made it a kind of battle-cry of freedom among the German reformers.

The modern interpretation of the text before us involves a little closer study of the Hebrew original than appears in the translations and exegeses already examined. The first part of vs. 4 is everywhere recognized as referring to the character of the Chaldean who is about to invade the land of Israel. The reading of the Hebrew text is in considerable doubt, because the Septuagint, Aquila, and the Targum give us another sense for the word "puffed up." It would appear that the two halves of the verse should stand in contrast with each other. To reach this result many suggestions have been made. If in the word "puffed up," the second and third letters be transposed (*ʿūp-p̄lā* becoming *ʿūl-l̄phā*), and the idea of the Targum be introduced in the first line, we have, according to Marti's suggestion, "Behold the wicked, his soul in him has languished," that is, has fallen down dead. In contrast with the death of the wicked would be the statement of the second part of the verse: "But the just shall live through his faithfulness." However acute this suggestion may be, the text nevertheless is uncertain. Taking the Massoretic reading as we find it, there is an implied comparison which a fair interpretation cannot resist. This "puffed up" one whose soul is not right in him shall not be able to stand before the invader. He shall perish at the first stroke of the invader, "but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness."

The second part of the verse is broader and more comprehensive than was recognized by the older interpreters. "The just," "the righteous" are such as are in the right, have right on their side. The idea is rather forensic, and belongs to a court of law. In a trial in court, the righteous man was the one who had the right on his side (cf. Isa. 1:18; 43:26). In its primitive sense it was merely a juridical right, with no idea of ethical righteousness. Gradually this idea of right conduct clothed itself with a moral and religious character, for it extended to and included such right conduct toward God, and toward his creatures. "The just," the "righteous" of

the Old Testament is scarcely more than what we call "sincerity," nor "more than what the New Testament calls a true heart, even when estimated at its highest" (Davidson, p. 275). The "righteous" man is then the true, sincere one whose words and works are in full harmony with the laws of right and so of God.

"Shall live by his faithfulness": Paul adopted the Greek and other versions, and rendered the last word "faith," and confined it apparently to the act of believing unto salvation as seen in Romans (1:16, 17). The Hebrew term used is much larger than faith, and carries in itself the idea of firmness, steadfastness, faithfulness. It is used of the holding-up of Moses' hands by Aaron and Hur (Exod. 17:12): "his hands were steadiness"; of the stability of the times (Isa. 33:6); of the trustworthiness of one in office (II Kings 22:7); of an office as a trust (I Chron. 9:22, 26); in connection with righteousness (Prov. 12:17); and of right conduct in general. The basis of its meaning is the verb to "believe," and in its many connections to believe in God. The root-idea of the noun is belief in, and faithfulness exercised toward, God in true whole-hearted obedience. A righteous one permeated by such characteristics shall live, shall endure; and to add the Hebrews idea, shall endure affliction and reproaches with patience and long-suffering. The righteous man through his faithfulness shall live perpetually.